

# First records of eight bird species for Eritrea

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**Première mention de huit espèces d'oiseaux pour l'Éritrée.** Huit additions à l'avifaune de l'Éritrée, observées en octobre 2007–avril 2009, sont documentées. Il s'agit des espèces suivantes : l'Érismature maccoa *Oxyura maccoa*, le Courvite somalien *Cursorius somalensis*, le Pigeon rameron *Columba arquatrix*, le Grand-duc du Cap *Bubo capensis*, l'Engoulevent d'Abyssinie *Caprimulgus poliocephalus*, la Bergeronnette à longue queue *Motacilla clara*, le Traquet familier *Cercomela familiaris* et la Locustelle tachetée *Locustella naevia*. Quatre d'entre elles sont présumées être des résidents, deux sont vraisemblablement des migrants locaux, une est probablement occasionnelle, tandis que la dernière est un migrateur paléarctique. Trois espèces ont été vues à deux occasions séparées et une, l'Érismature maccoa, a été notée sept fois en quatre localités différentes, indiquant qu'il s'agit probablement d'un colonisateur récent, qui a étendu son aire de distribution vers le nord à partir de l'Éthiopie.

**Summary.** Eight additions to Eritrea's bird list, recorded in the period October 2007–April 2009, are documented: Maccoa Duck *Oxyura maccoa*, Somali Courser *Cursorius somalensis*, African Olive Pigeon *Columba arquatrix*, Cape Eagle Owl *Bubo capensis*, Montane Nightjar *Caprimulgus poliocephalus*, Mountain Wagtail *Motacilla clara*, Familiar Chat *Cercomela familiaris* and Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*. Of these, four are presumed residents, two are likely to be local migrants, one is probably a vagrant and one is a Palearctic migrant. Three species were seen on two separate occasions and one, Maccoa Duck, was recorded seven times at four different localities, indicating that it is probably a recent colonist, having expanded its range north from Ethiopia.

From September 2007 to June 2009 I lived in Adi Keyih, a town in the south of the Eritrean highlands. During this time I recorded eight new species for the country, which are documented here. Some of these have already been included in Ash & Atkins (2009) and Redman *et al.* (2009). As I spent most of my time in and around Adi Keyih, unsurprisingly six of these species were recorded in the vicinity of the town, which lies c.35 km north of the Ethiopian border. The other two were found in Eritrea's only remaining extensive forest area, Filfil, in the centre of the country.

### Maccoa Duck *Oxyura maccoa*

On 25 April 2008 at c.16.00 hrs, on a small reservoir near the village of Hawatsu (14°53'48"N 39°20'55"E) at 2,300 m, c.10 km from Adi Keyih, I observed four unusual ducks, c.50 m distant. Given their close proximity and the lack of confusion species, it was easy to identify them as Maccoa Ducks, despite the absence of males in breeding plumage. They had a pale stripe below the eye, which contrasted with the overall dark brown plumage, and a stiff tail, diagnostic in sub-Saharan Africa of this species. The bill was dark. I took several photos, in which the key features can be seen.

Subsequently, I recorded the species on six other occasions (Table 1; Fig. 1). These records indicate that Maccoa Duck is widespread in the Eritrean highlands and present year-round, although I did not observe evidence of breeding. It is probable that, with the increasing number of reservoirs, Maccoa Duck has extended its range north from Ethiopia, colonising Eritrea in recent years. As other reservoirs are planned, other waterbirds might also extend their range north into Eritrea in the near future.

**Table 1.** Records of Maccoa Duck *Oxyura maccoa* in Eritrea, 2008–09  
**Tableau 1.** Mentions de l'Érismature maccoa *Oxyura maccoa* en Éritrée, 2008–09

Date	Locality / Localité	Number / Nombre
25 Apr 2008	Small reservoir near Hawatsu	4
10 May 2008	Afoma Reservoir, near Senafe	2; 1 ♂ breeding plumage (br.)
2 Jul 2008	Tseaziga Reservoir, near Tsada Christian	1 ♂ br.
21 Jul 2008	Adi Nfas Reservoir, near Asmara	8–9; at least 4 ♂ br.
1 Sep 2008	Acria Reservoir, near Asmara	2; 1 ♂ br.
25 Jan 2009	Adi Nfas Reservoir, near Asmara	1 non-br.
14 Feb 2009	Afoma Reservoir, near Senafe	5; 2 ♂ coming into br.





**Figure 1.** Male Maccoa Duck / Éristature maccoa *Oxyura maccoa*, Acria Reservoir, near Asmara, 1 September 2008 (J. Anderson)

**Figure 2.** African Olive Pigeon / Pigeon rameron *Columba arquatrix*, Karibosa (S. Ferwerda)

**Figure 3.** Cape Eagle Owl / Grand-duc du Cap *Bubo capensis dillonii*, Adi Keyih, Eritrea, April 2008 (J. Anderson)

**Figure 4.** Montane Nightjar / Engoulevent d'Abyssinie *Caprimulgus poliocephalus* (sex unconfirmed), Abi Girat, Eritrea, 25 February 2009 (J. Anderson)

**Figure 5.** Adult Mountain Wagtail / Bergeronnette à longue queue *Motacilla clara*, Adi Keyih, Eritrea, 21 October 2007 (J. Anderson)

**Figure 6.** Juvenile Mountain Wagtail / Bergeronnette à longue queue *Motacilla clara*, Adi Keyih, Eritrea, 21 October 2007 (J. Anderson)

**Figure 7.** Grasshopper Warbler / Locustelle tachetée *Locustella naevia*, Sabur, near Filfil, Eritrea, 26 January 2009 (J. Anderson)



### **Somali Courser** *Cursorius somalensis*

On 6 March 2008, at 07.10 hrs I was passing on my motorbike near the village of Mealewia (14°49'13"N 39°21'50"E), c.3 km south-west of Adi Keyih, at 2,400 m. Approximately 20 m from the road, on some ploughed but barren land I noticed a courser. I observed it through binoculars from a distance of c.20 m and made field notes. The bird's overall coloration was beige, and it had a clear black eye-stripe, a white supercilium, a dark grey crown and a white belly/vent, obviously paler than the breast. The bill was black and the legs pale grey. I twice flushed the bird and on both occasions clearly saw its pale inner wing, which is diagnostic of Somali Courser, Cream-coloured Courser *C. cursor* having an all-dark underwing. Subsequent visits to the same spot did not produce any more sightings, either that day, or on the following two days.

This is the first documented record of Somali Courser for Eritrea. An unpublished trip list by K. Harte and D. Berhane from December 2004 mentions a record of four Somali Coursers in the Eritrean coastal lowlands near Foro, c.50 km from Adi Keyih at sea level. D. Berhane (pers. comm.) informed me that he was unaware at the time that the species had not previously been recorded in Eritrea, and that he did not possess any field notes to confirm the identification.

The nearest confirmed sightings are from the north-eastern lowlands of Ethiopia and just across the border in Djibouti, c.400 km south-east of my sighting (Ash & Atkins 2009). The Eritrean records indicate that the species occasionally occurs significantly further north of its usual range and could conceivably occur alongside Cream-coloured Courser. However, the high altitude of my bird is atypical, suggesting a vagrant.

### **African Olive Pigeon** *Columba arquatrix*

On 26 January 2008 at 09.20 hrs, I was birdwatching near Filfil Solomuna, in the vicinity of the Medhanit Recreation Centre (15°37'01"N 38°56'07"E) at 1,000 m, in the middle of Eritrea's largest remaining tract of tropical forest. In a mature broad-leaved tree I observed a large pigeon with a dark head, yellow eye-ring, yellow bill, purple-grey on the wing and mantle, pale spots / mottling on the breast, and yellow feet. These features are diagnostic of African Olive Pigeon. The bird was only visible for c.30 seconds before

it disappeared into denser forest. I remained in the area for another three days, frequently returning to the same spot, but did not see the bird again.

On 14 February 2008 at 11.35 hrs, I was walking with two colleagues through riparian woodland at Karibosa, near Adi Keyih (14°54'42"N 39°25'12"E; c.100 km south of the first sighting) at 2,500 m, when I observed another African Olive Pigeon in a broad-leaved tree, c.5 m above me. We watched the bird for 5–7 minutes in excellent conditions and one of my colleagues took several photographs (Fig. 2).

These two sightings extend this pigeon's range north significantly, the nearest confirmed records being from 500 km further south, in Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009), although the species has recently also been discovered slightly nearer, in Djibouti (Redman *et al.* 2009). The species is probably resident in small numbers in isolated patches of mature woodland in Eritrea.

### **Cape Eagle Owl** *Bubo capensis*

On 1 April 2008, when I was visiting a school in Adi Keyih (14°51'14"N 39°22'07"E), at 2,400 m, I noticed a group of children surrounding a boy who was carrying a large owl. It transpired that he had bought the bird from a person who had found it injured on the ground close to a nearby village. I took the owl home and kept it alive for several days. The humerus of the left wing was completely broken close to the body.

The bright yellow-orange eyes separated it from all other large owls except Desert Eagle Owl *B. ascalaphus*. The overall darkness of the plumage, very heavy mottling on the upper breast and strong mottling on the belly identified it as Cape Eagle Owl (Fig. 3). Its length was 50 cm. The race present in Ethiopia (and presumably that involved here) is *dillonii*, which is sometimes treated with *B. c. mackinderi* (of Mozambique to Kenya) as a separate species, Mackinder's Eagle Owl *Bubo mackinderi*. The Natural History Museum at Tring possesses a specimen of Cape Eagle Owl collected in Senafe, Abyssinia, in 1868 (BMNH 1887.11.11.24), which is erroneously mentioned as a Desert Eagle Owl in Ash & Atkins (2009), leaving just one confirmed record for the latter species in Eritrea. As Senafe is in present-day Eritrea, the specimen becomes the first confirmed record of Cape Eagle Owl for the country, the record documented here being the second.

Although the nearest confirmed records are from central Ethiopia, 600 km to the south, there are also four uncertain records from northern Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009). It seems likely that the species is a rare resident in Eritrea, and possibly also in northern Ethiopia.

**Montane Nightjar** *Caprimulgus poliocephalus*

On 25 February 2009, at c.13.00 hrs, I flushed a nightjar from the ground near the village of Abi Girat, near Adi Keyih (14°53'33"N 39°22'00"E) at 2,200 m, along a lightly wooded stream in a small, quite barren valley with some small *Acacia abyssinica* and Prickly Pear *Opuntia ficus-indica*. The bird settled c.7 m away, and I took several photographs (Fig. 4). The only features I noticed were the rather dark overall coloration, a prominent chestnut collar, and several cream spots on the wing-coverts. It seemed similar in size to Dusky Nightjar *C. frenatus*, a species I had positively identified nearby, and I initially suspected that it was that species. When the bird flew off, it showed clear white wing spots, but I did not notice the tail pattern. When I tried to relocate the bird, I was only successful in flushing it again, whereupon it emitted a monosyllabic call twice in quick succession, *kwa-kwa*. It flew a little further away and, despite extensive searching, I was unable to find the bird again. Subsequent analysis of the photographs revealed the bird to be a Montane Nightjar.

Two months later, on 25 April 2009 at c.11.30hrs, I was birdwatching with D. Berhane at Karibosa, near Adi Keyih (14°54'49"N 39°25'18"E) at 2,500 m, when he flushed another Montane Nightjar from dense cover close to a dry riverbed. The bird settled on a branch, where we could take good-quality photographs. Comparison of these with two specimens at the Natural History Museum, Tring, collected near Lake Tana, in north-west Ethiopia (one male and one female), revealed that the plumage of the Eritrean birds was identical to that of the specimens.

Montane Nightjar is a rather uncommon resident in Ethiopia and the nearest confirmed record is from the Simien Mountains (Ash & Atkins 2009). Given the presence of suitable habitat in the southern Eritrean highlands, the species had long been suspected to occur. It is probably resident there, extending the species' range c.200 km northwards.

**Mountain Wagtail** *Motacilla clara*

On 21 October 2007 at 14.30 hrs, I was birdwatching in the Maka stream gorge near Adi Keyih (14°51'52"N 39°23'13"E) at 2,300 m. Following heavy rains, the stream was flowing well and I came across three wagtails that seemed quite different to White Wagtail *M. alba*, which is a common Palearctic migrant in the area. All three had a plain grey head and mantle, and dark wing feathers narrowly edged white. Two birds had a slim, dark 'V'-shaped breast-band, but this was absent on the third, which followed the other two. All three birds frequently uttered short sharp contact calls. I watched them for c.20 minutes, following them downstream, and took several poor-quality photographs, which confirm their identity as Mountain Wagtails (Figs. 5–6). The third bird's lack of breast-band indicates it was a juvenile. Whilst confusion with juvenile White Wagtail is possible, I observed the key features of Mountain Wagtail (narrow white supercilium, no black moustachial stripe, no white on the median coverts, very long tail).

This is the first record of Mountain Wagtail for Eritrea. The species is common in northern Ethiopia (Ash & Atkins 2009), making it unsurprising that it ranges slightly into Eritrea. However, despite checking the same stream regularly during the next two years, I did not see the species there again. In 2008 the rains were not as heavy and the water level was much lower. Mountain Wagtail may be a local migrant, appearing, and possibly breeding, in Eritrea only after heavy rains.

**Familiar Chat** *Cercomela familiaris*

On 12 October 2007 at 16.00 hrs, close to the village of Safira, near Adi Keyih (14°51'18"N 39°24'19"E) at 2,550 m, in an area of open scrub with large boulders, I spotted a small passerine pursuing insects 10–15 m away. The bird, which was constantly flicking its wings and bobbing its tail, was drab brown overall and had a brownish-rufous rump and outer tail with a 'T'-shaped dark central band and tail end. The slender, horizontal jizz did not match Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* or Black Redstart *P. ochruros*, both of which I know well, and the underparts were also too pale for either. I observed the bird for c.5 minutes before it flew off and identified it as a Familiar Chat. Despite extensive observation,



I did not notice the rufous mask described and illustrated in Sinclair & Ryan (2003); instead, the head appeared uniformly brown.

Exactly one year later, on 12 October 2008, I encountered the species again, feeding in a dry streambed in a rocky valley several kilometres south of the original sighting. I attempted to take a photograph, but the bird flew off and I failed to relocate it.

These are the first records for Eritrea of Familiar Chat, whose Ethiopian range extends right up to the Eritrean border. My sightings thus extend the species' range only slightly but they are from a higher altitude than those in Ethiopia (1,090–2,000 m: Ash & Atkins 2009). I visited both sites regularly thereafter, but did not find the species again. Possibly Familiar Chat is a local migrant, with some birds moving north after the rainy season: both sightings were made in mid October, following the rains, when insects are most plentiful.

#### **Grasshopper Warbler** *Locustella naevia*

On 26 January 2009 at 11.30 hrs, near Sabur Recreation Centre, Filfil Solomuna (c.15°36'N 38°55'E), at c.1,300–1,400 m, in an area of open, ungrazed meadows on a steep hillside with small bushes, surrounded by broadleaf woodland, I separately flushed two small brown birds from the 20–80 cm high grass. Both dived into small bushes nearby. I was unable to relocate the first bird, but the second remained for 20 minutes in a very small bush, which I approached to within 10 m. Immediately, I noticed diagnostic dark markings on the pale undertail-coverts, as the bird cocked its tail and turned away. I also noted the generally brown upperparts with black streaking on the mantle, crown and wings, slight streaking on the breast below a pale throat, and dark face with no clear supercilium. These features are consistent with Grasshopper Warbler. I obtained several reasonable photographs, which confirm the bird's identity (Fig. 7).

I suspect that the other bird I flushed, as well as a third I briefly saw the same day, were also Grasshopper Warblers. Possibly the area is a wintering ground for this Palearctic migrant. (See also Anderson & Berhane (submitted) for more about the importance of this site.) There are no previous records in Eritrea of Grasshopper Warbler, which is an uncommon winter visitor to

Ethiopia, with only 13 records mentioned by Ash & Atkins (2009).

#### **Note**

This paper originally also included a record of Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* from Mai Nefe Reservoir, near Asmara (15°15'34"N 38°47'47"E) on 3 February 2009. Recently, however, two records of Great Cormorant have been published, albeit undated (De Marchi *et al.* 2009). Giuseppe De Marchi (pers. comm.) informed me that these concerned a dead bird on NN045 Island in Howakil Bay on 30 December 2002 and a live bird in shallow water in the Gulf of Zula on 7 January 2006. My record from Mai Nefe thus becomes the third confirmed record of Great Cormorant in Eritrea.

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